

(A-15)

or Mexican colonization law. Sharon helped secure passage of an ordinance to study the archives of former authorities and laws relating to titles, and the information became the basis of subsequent determinations.⁸ In another action Sharon voted with the majority, passing a bill to pay aldermen six thousand dollars a year. The cash-strapped community's hue and cry forced a veto of the bill and its reduction by a third.

In August 1850 Sharon and seven others, including future mayor John W. Geary and future U.S. senator David C. Broderick, formed a group to assist beleaguered immigrants. Twenty thousand had arrived on the overland route to California, and twenty thousand more were still struggling across the Sierra Nevada. By nightfall the committee collected provisions and about six thousand dollars in cash to distribute to the sufferers.⁹

Although its frontier nature was apparent (on June 22 a five-hundred-pound grizzly bear had been captured near the city's Mission Dolores), San Francisco was becoming a metropolitan center. Fire departments were organized, and on September 9, 1850, California became a state. More than sixty thousand men and two thousand women had arrived during the past year (although many proceeded on to the goldfields); 626 vessels lay in the bay.¹⁰ As building in the city became frenzied, Sharon prospered.

In 1852 Sharon married Maria Malloy, the daughter of a noted sea captain from Quebec, Canada. She had come to San Francisco with her mother and stepfather. Less than twenty years old, cultured and refined, she bore Sharon five children, three of whom survived to adulthood.¹¹

Early in 1854, robberies, riots, and two murders were laid at the feet of the city's "squatting rascality." On June 5 Sharon helped organize property owners into the Association for the Protection of Property. In 1855 the editors of the *Annals of San Francisco* reported on the organization's activities: "As we close [the spring report], inquests are being held over the murdered bodies, and various rioters are detained for trial in the hospitals and prison."¹²

Between 1850 and 1864 Sharon bought and sold land and amassed a fortune of \$150,000. A businessman later noted, "I came here in 1859 and

'Here's 500 more.' 'Take it,' he said. 'Here's 500 more if you want it.' 'Take it,' he said and left the room."

Sharon later told Peckham he believed he had been cheated. He marked his stocks with red ink in the letter O in North American. When the stocks were checked, 1,000 of the 1,700 shares were marked. Sharon had purchased his own stock. Peckham said that Sharon gave him all the money he had on hand without flinching and promised to pay the large balance.¹⁶

William Sharon and William Chapman Ralston had become acquainted sometime around May of 1858, when Ralston married Lizzie Fry, the niece of John Fry.¹⁷ Fry, accompanied by Sharon's associate Wakelee, went to Ralston on Sharon's behalf. The banker agreed to buy whatever real estate Sharon owned to cover the rest of his stock-market debt. Sharon was left penniless. Shortly thereafter, Ralston began to advance Sharon \$250 a month and took action that changed both their lives as well as the history of Nevada and California. He made Sharon his partner and appointed him the Bank of California's representative in Virginia City, Nevada.¹⁸

Sharon did not fit the image of the western capitalist. He wore a big brimmed, slouch hat and quoted the classics. He dressed in black broadcloth, giving him a clerical or ministerial appearance. Unlike brawny Bonanza millionaires, Sharon weighed perhaps 135 pounds and seemed reserved to the point of aloofness. He laughed but rarely smiled. While others might seek to be in the foreground, he blended in with a crowd—although always acting with purpose. His distinguishing feature was his eyes. Detractors said they were black and beady, sly and devious; to friends they were searching, projecting intelligence. According to Goodwin's description: "His face was lighted by a pair of cold gray eyes, a glance into which made clear that any one who dealt with him should understand from the first that no bluff would ever carry with him, that no matter what the crisis would be it would be met without fear."¹⁹

On the other hand, Ralston was stocky and powerful. People frequently described him as handsome. From the time he founded it in 1864

him the most entire West. Garrison and banking firm powerful Eugene ons, Ralston came dissatis- these was the assistance that could be a pri- sources to lend

Donahoe on and Com- On July 5 the spect Sacra- but served venture. He ing Ralston,

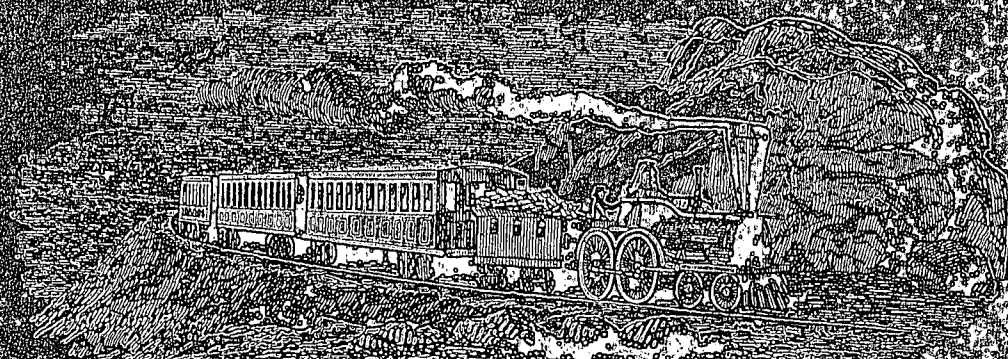
ventors, schemers, and promoters to entertain their ideas. He bought hundreds of patents and provided money for everything from planting the first northern California vineyards to creating a California wool industry and building San Francisco's California Theater.²⁴

Not only associates but employees and even acquaintances regarded Ralston as a friend. He made it a point to visit the myriad concerns in which he held an interest, talking with the workers about their jobs and families. They felt as though they knew him and he held them in high regard. When he made Sharon his partner, he allowed him to escape bankruptcy. Naming him the bank representative in Virginia City earned Ralston and his corporations millions of dollars.

The phenomenon of Virginia City mushroomed above the Comstock vein on the side of Mount Davidson, six thousand feet above sea level. To the west, beyond a string of three valleys, rose the escarpment of the Sierra Nevada. To the east lay three hundred and fifty miles of alternating barren hills and desert: the Great Basin. The wealth of the vein ensured that the most advanced technology would be imported, as would amenities and certain urban comforts. But social institutions, laws, and mores proved to be situational.

Mark Twain described the Virginia City he experienced in the early 1860's as "the liveliest town for its age and population that America ever produced." He spoke of swarms of people and endless streams of vehicles. He also recited what became a famous list:

There were military companies, fire companies, brass bands, banks, hotels, theaters, 'hurdy-gurdy houses,' wide-open gambling palaces, political pow-wows, civic processions, street-fights, murders, inquests, riots, a whiskey-mill every fifteen steps, a Board of Aldermen, a Mayor, a City Surveyor, a City Engineer, a Chief of the Fire Department, with First, Second, and Third Assistants, a Chief of Police, City Marshal, and a large police force, two Boards of Mining Brokers, a dozen breweries, and half a dozen jails and station-houses in full operation, and some talk of building a church.²⁵



A Biography

THE
INFAMOUS
KING
OF THE
COMSTOCK



*William Sharon and the Gilded Age
in the West* MICHAEL J. MAKLEY